

Chapter 7

The Writer in a Neo-colonial State

Extract



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How does a writer function in [such a] society? He can of course adopt silence or self-censorship, in which case he ceases to be an effective writer. Or he can become a state functionary, an option some Kenyan writers have now embraced, and once again cease to be an effective writer of the people. Or he may risk jail or exile, in which case he is driven from the very sources of his inspiration. Write and risk damnation. Avoid damnation and cease to be a writer. That is the lot of the writer in the neo-colonial state.

There are other contradictions of a writer in a neo-colonial state. For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use? It is a fact that the African Writers who emerged after the Second World War opted for European languages. All the major African writers wrote in English, French or Portuguese. But by and large, all the peasants and a majority of the workers – the masses – have their own languages.

Isn't the writer perpetuating, at the level of cultural practice, the very neo-colonialism he is condemning at the level of economic and political practice? For who a writer *writes* is a question which has not been satisfactorily resolved by the writers in a neo-colonial state. For the African writer, the language he has chosen already has chosen his audience.

Whatever the language the writer has opted for, what is his relationship with the content? Does he see reality in its unchangeingness or in its changeingness? To see reality in stagnation or in circles of the same movements is to succumb to despair. And yet for him to depict reality in its revolutionary transformation from the standpoint of the people – the agents of change – is once again to risk damnation by the state. For a writer who is depicting reality in its revolutionary transformation is, in effect, telling the upholders of the status quo: even this too shall pass away.

I think I have said enough about the writer in the third period – the seventies – to show that his lot, particularly when he may want to edge towards the people, is not easy.

In the world, the struggle between democratic and socialist forces for life and human progress on the one hand, and the imperialist forces for reaction and death on the other is still going on and it is bound to become more fierce. Imperialism is still the enemy of human kind and any blow against imperialism whether in the Philippines, El Salvador, Chile, South Korea is clearly a blow for democracy and change. In Africa, the struggle of the Namibian people and of South African/Azanian people has intensified. And as the Zimbabwean, Angolan, and Mozambican struggles took the African revolution a stage further than where it had been left by the FLN and the Kenyan Land a Freedom Army in the fifties, in the same way the successful outcome of the Namibian and South African peoples' struggle will push the entire continent on to a new stage. In a special way, the liberation of South Africa is the key to the liberation of the entire continent from neo-colonialism.

Within the neo-colonial states, the anti-imperialist alliance of democratic forces will intensify the struggle against the rule of the alliance of the comprador class and imperialism. There will be more and more anti-imperialist coups of the Sankara type. There will be an increase in the Uganda type anti-neocolonial guerrilla movements. There will be greater and greater call and demand for a Pan-Africanism of the proletariat and the peasantry through their progressive democratic organisation. Each new stage in the struggle for real independence, democracy and socialism will have learnt from the errors of the previous attempts, successes and even failures. We shall see a further heightening of the war against neo-colonialism. For as in the days of colonialism, so now in the days of neo-colonialism, the African people are still struggling for a world in which they can control that which their collective sweat produces, a world in which they will control the economy, politics and culture to make their lives accord with where they want to go and who they want to be.

But as the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier. His choice? It seems to me that the African writer now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real languages of struggle in the actions and speech of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves.

He must be part of the song the people sing as once again they take up arms to smash the neo-colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started in the fifties, and even earlier. A people united can never be defeated and the writer must be part and parcel of that revolutionary unity for democracy, socialism and the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human.

Course: Languages

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